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# Humility and Wisdom

## Necessary Ingredients to Reverse the Widget Effect

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In June 2009 the New Teacher Project released its latest report, *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness* (Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, & Keeling, 2009). Published a few months earlier, Larry Cuban's *Hugging the Middle: How Teachers Teach in an Era of Testing and Accountability* (2009), updates his landmark historical study of teaching practice, *How Teachers Taught* (1993). These two pieces, read side by side, highlight the challenges to improve teaching practice on a large scale. Taken together, they bring to bear economic and historical lenses on the persistent questions: Why do we continue to allow weak instruction to go unaddressed in schools? What can policymakers do to ensure more teachers in the work force are able to foster students' academic growth?

The authors of *The Widget Effect* (Weisberg et al., 2009) coined this term to name the "flawed assumption that has pervaded American educational policy for decades—the assumption that teachers are interchangeable parts" (p. 9). The report studies teacher performance management policies and practices in 12 school districts in four states. Its major finding is that teacher evaluation systems fail to "produce meaningful information about teacher effectiveness" (p. 10). Without such information, administrators are unable to recognize and reward the most talented, weed out the most incompetent, and provide targeted support to improve the practice of the vast majority of teachers who fall in the middle of the performance range. For the authors, this amounts to an unacceptable indifference to instructional effectiveness that reflects a deep disrespect both for teachers and for the most vulnerable students in schools who are most likely to experience poor instruction. To enhance information administrators and teachers have available in making

crucial teacher decisions, the report argues for a comprehensive reform of the evaluation systems and policies governing teachers in public schools. Specifically, they suggest a four-pronged strategy to reverse the Widget Effect.

- Adopt a comprehensive performance evaluation system that fairly, accurately, and credibly differentiates teachers based on their effectiveness in promoting student achievement.
- Train administrators and other evaluators in their teacher performance evaluation system and hold them accountable for using it effectively.
- Integrate the performance evaluation system with critical human capital policies and functions such as teacher assignment, professional development, compensation, retention, and dismissal.
- Adopt dismissal policies that provide lower-stakes options for ineffective teachers to exit the district and a system of due process that is fair but efficient. (pp. 7-8)

Like many, we support the report's central tenet, that treating teachers as widgets is disrespectful to teachers and detrimental to the profession. We find refreshing the idea of a teacher evaluation system that values teachers' individuality while holding teachers accountable for student learning. Although the report offers a sensible, rational approach to both raise the bar for instructional practice and root out subpar instruction in public schools, we believe it is unlikely to occur unless accompanied by a simultaneous transformation in the public policy/media

**Authors' Note:** As an editorial team, the editors write editorials collaboratively. To reflect the nature of this joint work, they rotate the order of authors with each journal issue.

climate as well as professional organizational norms and practices. To contextualize this claim, we turn to Cuban's *Hugging the Middle* (2009).

In *Hugging the Middle*, Cuban (2009), who has lived his professional life with one foot in schools and the other in the world of educational research, aptly characterizes the policy/media climate in the following terms:

Since the mid-1980s, state- and federally-driven reforms aimed at improving student academic achievement have sprinted through U.S. schools. . . . The theory behind the business-inspired standards-based reform, then and now, is that when state leaders clearly prescribe goals and outcomes that schools must meet, accompanied by clear rewards and penalties, yet leaving the process—how schools meet goals and benchmarks—to the districts and schools themselves, then schools will perform better than they have. Embedded in that theory is the assumption that low performing schools do poorly because their administrators and teachers have had little oversight, fail to use available data, and need both incentives and sanctions to fully use their expertise on behalf of their students. (pp. 13-14)

He goes on to argue that these business-inspired reforms assume that

inadequate funding, poor facilities, and spotty knowledge or insufficient skills are not the fundamental issues; teacher motivation, supervision, and data-driven decision-making are missing. Less trust and more fear will jog practitioners to do what they are supposed to do. (p. 14)

Cuban paints a picture of a public policy/media environment where chronic school criticism has been the norm for more than a quarter century and where teachers paradoxically are both the problem and the solution.

Coverage of *The Widget Effect* (Weisberg et al., 2009) in the popular press conforms tidily to Cuban's synthesis. Headlines and op-editorials related to *The Widget Effect* heralds the report and highlights those findings most critical of educators—namely that too many teachers are given satisfactory ratings and dismissal policies make it too burdensome for administrators to let poor performers go (see <http://widgeteffect.org/>). To build the performance-management system called for in the report, teachers must trust that it will provide credible and fair assessments of their practice. One strategy for building such trust is to establish mechanisms for joint policy-making. However, a public policy/media environment hostile to teachers makes it less likely that those teachers whose voices are most critical to have at the table will choose to participate in designing these systems. To

revamp teacher evaluation systems without having these teachers involved in the process is an opportunity lost.

At the heart of Cuban's (2009) text is a study of the links between instructional policy and classroom practice. To do this, Cuban extended his inquiry in *How Teachers Taught* (1993). Using a similar research design, he returned to two districts from that first study (Denver, CO, and Arlington, VA) and he added a third district, Oakland, CA. He sought to understand how the current policy demands of standards-based reforms, increased testing, how accountability measures shape classroom practice, whether teacher's practices differ among high- and low-poverty schools, how teachers use technology, and whether pedagogical traditions can be linked to student learning outcomes.

Cuban (2009) found that teachers tend to hug the middle of the pedagogical continuum between teacher- and student-centered practices, engaging in hybrid pedagogies he called "teacher-centered progressivism." That is, given limited discretion in classrooms and the many uncertainties they face, teachers make pragmatic decisions about what works in their classroom with their students. They are likely to blend their practices—drawing from multiple teaching traditions, their experiences in schools (as learners and observers of other teachers), their beliefs about teaching and learning, and knowledge from teacher education and professional development. In all three districts studied, this hybrid pedagogical approach was more prevalent in elementary than in secondary classrooms. Cuban found evidence of this approach in both high- and low-poverty classrooms, casting some doubt on conventional wisdom among educators that minority and poor children primarily experience teacher-centered, skill-and-drill pedagogies.

Cuban (2009) argued that it is useless to try to prove there is a single best way of teaching that works with all students. He makes this case through three interrelated points: (a) content shapes what and how one teaches; (b) teachers take a pragmatic stance toward pedagogy; and (c) given the complexity of teaching practice, empirical research has been unable to prove definitively that either teacher- or student-centered instruction leads to desired student learning gains. Cuban's new empirical analyses and well-reasoned arguments from the research literature on teaching practice suggest that devising a new teacher evaluation system that is credible and fair will mean developing teacher assessments and observation and coaching tools that allow for a broad range of teaching practices. To recognize excellence as well as to provide targeted support to raise novice or merely competent teachers' performance, these tools must take into account the highly contextualized nature of effective teaching.

To close, we return to the problem *The Widget Effect* (Weisberg et al., 2009) takes on—why poor instruction persists and goes unaddressed in schools—and speculate whether a transformed teacher evaluation system will yield solutions that have eluded previous generations of reformers. *The Widget Effect* reflects a human capital approach to reform teacher education and the teaching profession. Human capital reforms, in a nutshell, begin with the premise that the primary mission of public schools is to promote students' academic growth and teachers are pivotal to foster that achievement, particularly when children live in poverty. Research and policy initiatives within this approach emphasize strategies that address the three *Rs* of the teaching profession, namely, identify and *recruit* the “best” into teaching, and *reward* (or *recognize*) and *retain* only the most “effective” teachers.

Cuban's (2009) recent historical analyses of how teachers teach in an era of testing and accountability suggest that teachers who are most likely to be successful with the broad range of learners who comprise most classrooms are those who hug the middle. In light of Cuban's analyses, we hope district leaders recognize that to build systems that will offer sufficiently nuanced insight both to improve teachers' practice and to provide adequate evidence to weed poor teachers out, they must bring to the table pragmatic teachers, across all content areas, to develop observation and feedback systems that take an eclectic and practical view toward teaching practices. Districts will also benefit from supporting research agendas that allow them to evaluate teaching effectiveness in

their contextualized settings because the broader research literature has not settled definitively which practices are most likely to yield academic gains for all learners.

“Make no small plans” captures the spirit of the day. The optimism and hope that characterizes *The Widget Effect's* (Weisberg et al., 2009) call to transform teacher evaluation systems is inspirational. Yet Cuban's (2009) reflective view on nearly a half century of efforts to reform teaching suggests that a stance of humility is in order. Cuban's wisdom, forged over nearly a half century in schools, cautions those undertaking this endeavor.

That growing uncertainty about which reforms are best to improve classroom teaching and learning, convert low-performing schools and districts to high-performing ones—especially in cities with largely minority and poor students—has made me far more humble in offering prescriptions when I put on my reformer's hat and far less cocky, even regretful, about the truths I have uncovered when I put on my scholar's hat. (pp. 3-4)

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